

■ PBS_American_Experience-20140117-Last Days in Vietnam (Director Rory Kennedy) [transcript_0A]

Stuart Herrington, Army Captain: As we began to contemplate evacuation, the question, the burning question was, who goes? And who gets left behind?

I borrowed a truck, and I basically sent the signal to my folks, and this meant a group of South Vietnamese majors, lieutenant colonels, colonels and their families to muster at an address in downtown Saigon. I drove down there. They loaded up onto the truck, and I drove them to the airbase. And I had told them, "When you hear three thumps that means hold the babies mouths, don't breath, don't talk, don't make any noise because we're going through the gate post." I saluted in uniform as a captain of the United States Army. The guard waved me through, and I drove straight out to the flight line to an aircraft that was awaiting. One Vietnamese colonel was putting his family on the plane, he had wanted to stay in Vietnam to defend the country. And this full colonel had like eight kids and a wife. And he was in tears, a family... the family were in tears and I said to him, "Get on the plane. Just go. Go." It was a terrible, terrible, terrible moral dilemma for everybody.

Slate: Two years earlier

Richard Nixon (archival): We today have concluded an agreement to end the war and bring peace with honor in Vietnam.

Slate: In January 1973, the Paris Peace Accords was signed.

The agreement called for a cease-fire between North and South Vietnam, and marked the withdrawal of American troops.

Richard Nixon (archival): We have adopted a plan for the complete withdrawal of all U.S. combat ground forces. We are finally bringing American men home.

Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State: We who made the agreement thought that it would be the beginning not of peace in the American sense, but the beginning of a period of co-existence which might evolve as it did in Korea into two states. Reconciliation between North and South Vietnam we knew would be extremely difficult. But I was hopeful.

Stuart Herrington, Army Captain: Because of the Paris Agreement American soldiers were going home. But I was on my way back to Vietnam.

Stuart Herrington, Army Captain: I was assigned to Saigon in the first week of August, 1973. So about six months after the ceasefire. I would say that between the state department people and the CIA people, the contractors who were there to maintain infrastructure, maintain aircraft, as well as people like me, we had 5 to 7,000 Americans in country. A lot of the guys had Vietnamese girlfriends and wives. In many cases with children. In general, things were eerily calm and in many ways normal in Saigon.

Juan Valdez, Marine Embassy Guard: My sense was that we were gonna be there, you know, pretty much for a long time to come. I was assigned to the American Embassy in Saigon. I was in charge of the 84 marine security guards that were there. Making sure that they kept up with their physical fitness training. We were there to protect American lives, as well as American property. It was just a day to day job.

Frank Snepp, CIA Analyst: The ambassador there was a guy named Graham Martin, a North Carolinian, just as I was. He spoke with a slow, southern drawl. He was a great gentleman. He was a cold warrior in the yellow stripe. He'd lost an adopted son in Vietnam to combat. And he was not gonna give up South Vietnam to the Communists. He was determined to keep U.S. aid flowing into Saigon. When the cease-fire occurred, in 1973, everybody toasted it with Bloody Marys in the U.S. Embassy. It was a grand party. We though peace was at hand. But The Paris Peace Accord was a masterpiece of ambiguity.

Stuart Herrington, Army Captain: In order to get President Thieu and the South Vietnamese to go along with the Paris Agreement, President Nixon pulled out all the stops. And in a letter to President Thieu he promised that if the North Vietnamese were to substantially violate the terms of the Paris Agreement, the United States would respond with full force. In other words, reenter the war.

Frank Snepp, CIA Analyst: The North Vietnamese viewed Nixon as a madman. They were terrified of him. They believed that Nixon, if necessary, would bring back American air power. But in August, 1974, he was gone. Nixon resigned because of Watergate. And overnight, everything changed. Hanoi suddenly saw the road to Saigon as being open.

Slate: On March 10, 1975, North Vietnam launched a massive invasion into South Vietnam.

Stuart Herrington, Army Captain: The South Vietnamese population had ample reason to fear the Vietnamese Communists. The Communist conduct throughout the course of the war had been violent and unforgiving. For example when the city of Hue was taken over by the North Vietnamese, several thousand people on a long blacklist were rounded up, schoolteachers, government civil servants, people who were known anti-Communists, and they were executed, in some cases even buried alive, so panic was but a millimeter away.

Walter Cronkite (archival): Hundred of thousands of refugees are in a blind rush to flee even further from the rapidly advancing communists. Bruce Dunning reports

Bruce Dunning, Reporter, CBS News (archival audio): President Thieu broadcast a strong appeal to the soldiers and people of Da Nang urging them to stay and fight.

Kiem Do, Captain, South Vietnamese Navy (in Vietnamese, subtitled): Our orders were very conflicting. One day we would get orders to defend Da Nang. On the next, we would get orders to abandon it.

Dan Rather, CBS News (archival): As the enemy approaches, the panic has swept from the coastal cities crowded backstreets and pagodas onto runways at the airport.

Reporter, CBS News (archival): Our plane is surrounded here, I don't know how the hell we're going to get out. We're racing down the runway, leaving behind hundreds and thousands of people. Another dozen of them, running along grabbing at the air stair. We're pulling them on as fast as we can. There's a sea of humanity jamming on. Impossible, uh, to stop the crowd. We're pulling away, we're leaving them behind! We're pulling up with the... people are falling off the air stairs! The plane is taking off.

Stuart Herrington, Army Captain: It was every man for himself. So you saw the World Airways flights being mobbed by South Vietnamese soldiers. You saw ships with thousands of refugees, including lots of soldiers. You saw out of control panic. Basically any boats, trucks, airplanes or anything going south were besieged by people wanting to get onboard.

Frank Snepp, CIA Analyst: The Americans were gone and as a result the house of cards began to collapse. The North Vietnamese decided to escalate, escalate, escalate, escalate at every turn to see if the United States would react.

Ron Nessen, White House Press Secretary: In April of '75, I was with President Gerald Ford, and we were flying across the country on Air Force One when one of the airplane's crew comes and hands me a note and it says, "Da Nang has fallen." Ford was bombarded by questions from the press after he got off Air Force One.

Gerald Ford (archival) Around 150-175,000 well trained North Vietnamese regular forces in violation of the Paris peace accords moved into South Vietnam. We have objected to that violation. It's a tragedy unbelievable in its ramifications.

Frank Snepp, CIA Analyst: We are now in a crisis. We had a wave of humanity. 500,000 refugees rolling, rolling south towards Saigon. And 160,000 North Vietnamese troops moving right behind them. I had become so concerned I decided to pull our best Vietnamese agents in out of the woodwork to try to see what they could tell us about Communist planning, which obviously was rapidly evolving. On the 8th of April, I met with one of our best agents who said, "the Communists are gonna drive on Saigon. They're gonna be in there by Ho Chi Minh's birthday", which was May 19, literally a month away.

Walter Cronkite, CBS News (archival): Communist forces in South Vietnam, already solidly in control of 11 provinces, began working on yet another one today: Binh Dinh.

Kiem Do, Captain, South Vietnamese Navy (in Vietnamese, subtitled): We tried to do our best without thinking about the future. We couldn't repair or replace equipment. Field hospitals had to reuse soiled bandages. We had many obstacles. We didn't know how much longer we could last.

Stuart Herrington, Army Captain: I kept a map every day on the progress of the North Vietnamese onslaught. By the 5th of April, the North Vietnamese had 15, even 16 divisions heading in the direction of Saigon. They were bringing SA-2 missiles down to provide anti-aircraft cover for their forces. There were people who were saying, "Look, we've gotta do some heavy, heavy planning here because depending on how this goes and it doesn't look good now, we may all have to evacuate. And Ambassador Martin wouldn't tolerate or countenance such thought. That was defeatism. That was poisonous to the prospects of the people we're here to help. But people could see what was going on. And they started leaving, especially the Americans.

Joe Bruscio (archival): I'm leaving Vietnam.

Garrick Utley, Reporter, NBC News (archival): Why?

Joe Bruscio (archival): Uh... I'm kind of scared, to be honest with you. To be perfectly honest with you, I'm really scared. I think the situation's a lot worse than we know about.

Frank Snepp, CIA Analyst: There was always a standing evacuation plan in the embassy. It held that in an emergency, all Americans still in the country, about 6,000 people, would be evacuated. And that no South Vietnamese would be evacuated with them.

Binh Pho, College Student: I was a student. The schools not closing but... it seem like nobody interested in school anymore. You can't stay here. You can't live with the communists. Especially if you have a connection with the Americans. Then you really gotta get out.

Stuart Herrington, Army Captain: If we really made up a list of endangered South Vietnamese, the ones who really worked closely with us during the war, this number could be 150-200,000. Including their families, many more than that. But the idea of talking about an evacuation and of planning for an evacuation of Americans, let alone an evacuation of Vietnamese, was still an anathema in the embassy.

Graham Martin, U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam (archival): If you, if you, if you mean is South Vietnam is on the imminent verge of collapse? I think the answer is quite definitely no. I mean, you have...

Steve Hasty, Marine Consulate Guard: We were dealing with an ambassador who was just convinced that somehow he was going to be able to pull this out and that there wouldn't have to be an evacuation and therefore there wouldn't have to be a concern about evacuating South Vietnamese.

Slate: Washington, D.S. April 10, 1975

Gerald Ford (archival): The situation in South Vietnam has reached a critical phase requiring immediate and positive decisions by this government. There are tens of thousands of South Vietnamese employees of the United States government, of news agencies, of contractors and businesses for many years whose lives, with their dependents, are in very grave peril. I'm therefore asking the congress to appropriate without delay \$722

million for emergency military assistance for South Vietnam. If the very worst were to happen, at least allow the orderly evacuation of Americans and endangered South Vietnamese to places of safety.

Rep. Pete McCloskey, (R) California: There was no way in 1975 that the Congress was gonna vote any money to go to the aid of South Vietnam. We'd pulled out our troops in 1973 and public opinion at that point shifted. The people of the United States having seen Watergate, having seen the deception of the generals weren't about to give any help in Southeast Asia. And, you know, Kissinger knew this.

Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State: We knew we were not going to get the 722 million. By that time it made no big difference, but President Ford said he owed it to Vietnam to make a request.

Rep. Millicent Fenwick, (R) New Jersey (archival): We've sent, so to speak, battleship after battleship and bomber after bomber and 500,000 and more men and billions and billions of dollars. If billions and billions didn't do at a time when we had all our men there, how can \$722 million save the day?

Stuart Herrington, Army Captain: This is the way my map looked mid April. The North Vietnamese just rolled down the coast. Saigon was clearly threatened. The situation was urgent. Urgent understates it.

Frank Snepp, CIA Analyst: At this time, Ambassador Martin had been back in Washington trying to persuade Congress to vote additional aid.

Aide to Graham Martin (archival): He has no statement to make.

Frank Snepp, CIA Analyst: He came back to Saigon and my boss, the CIA station chief said, "Go down and tell the old man what's happening." I went, and I said, "Mr. Ambassador, half of the South Vietnamese Army has disintegrated, we're in grave trouble. Please, sir, plan for an evacuation. At least allow us to begin putting together lists of South Vietnamese we should rescue." And he said "No, Frank. It's not so bleak, and I won't have this negative talk."

Young officers in the embassy began to mobilize a black operation. Meaning, a makeshift underground railway evacuation using outgoing cargo aircraft that would be totally below the radar of the ambassador.

Stuart Herrington, Army Captain: People like myself and others took the bull by the horns and organized an evacuation. In my case, that meant friends of mine who were senior officers in the South Vietnamese military. As the North Vietnamese came closer and closer to Saigon, these people were dead men walking.

I had arranged a signal with my intelligence community friends that if I said, "I'm having a barbecue," that meant come to a certain pre-designated place and bring your families and only bring one suitcase because we're going to have a party. But it was understood the party meant I was going to get them out. Black Ops were essentially violating the rules. In this case, meaning, "You're not allowed to bring out Vietnamese military people who were under obligation to stand and fight." We were fully expecting if we got caught doing this that we would be run out of country, end of career, do not pass go. But sometimes there's an issue not of legal and illegal, but right or wrong.

Frank Snepp, CIA Analyst: The deputy defense attaché moved out Vietnamese personnel and their families, to Clark airbase in the Philippines without any approval whatsoever. Without any immigration papers, anything, passports, you name it. And when they began showing up in the Philippines, Martin hit the roof and fired him! But that didn't stop other state department people who had Vietnamese friends and family members. They continued to organize these makeshift airlifts.

Slate: April 14, 1975

Terry McNamara, Consul General: That April I was in Can Tho, which was about 100 miles from Saigon. And we were getting reports of this town falling and that province falling and so on. And then we were attacked. Sgt. Hasty came by to give me a report on the damage.

Steve Hasty, Marine Consulate Guard: Can Tho came under pretty intense artillery bombardment. The North Vietnamese had overrun some South Vietnamese artillery batteries and managed to turn those around and shell the center of Can Tho.

Terry McNamara, Consul General: I was in regular contact with the embassy, and I was told that when the time came, I should be ready to evacuate. And that I should not try to take any Vietnamese out. Because it was too dangerous, and I should only restrict myself to evacuating Americans using my three helicopters. Well, I'd been there for almost five years at this point and I was committed to the Vietnamese. I did have a responsibility, I thought, for the people who worked for us, and who had given their loyal service to us over many years.

So I decided that despite the order from Saigon, we're gonna really make an effort to evacuate the people in Can Tho who I thought might be in mortal danger. This could be hundreds of people. So I spent one sleepless night worrying about this, "How am I going to do this?" And then I thought, hell, we're on a river. We don't need helicopters. We can go down the river. It's 70 miles from Can Tho down to the mouth of the river. So I found two invasion barges and got them ready to go.

Steve Hasty, Marine Consulate Guard: We knew that the situation was bad. We could see that the South Vietnamese army was eroding. Supplies had been cut off, and you could see the armaments dwindling.

Terry McNamara, Consul General: We were, under the terms of the Paris Agreement, committed to resupplying the South Vietnamese. They lacked simple things like barbed wire and bags for sand bags. They were rationing their artillery shells because they were running out. The military support, the materiel support, was not coming.

Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State: When President Ford went before the congress, he had two major concerns. The first was to save as many people as we could. He cared for the human beings involved; they were not just pawns that once they had lost their military power were abandoned. The second was the honor of America -- that we would not be seen at the final agony of South Vietnam as having stabbed it in the back.

Ron Nessen, White House Press Secretary: Congress wouldn't pass it. They said "No more. You know? No more troops, no more money, no more aid to the Vietnamese." Well, I had to go into President Ford's office to tell him. I had never heard Ford use a curse word in all the time I'd known him. But when I showed him this story, he said, "Those sons of bitches."

Slate: South China Sea, April 18, 1975

Hugh Doyle, Chief Engineer, USS Kirk: I think there were a total of 50 ships that were there. I mean, it wasn't just us; it was a whole bunch of ships. We were standing by for the evacuation of Americans.

I was a terrible letter writer. I would write one letter for my wife's ten letters. And she didn't like that. So she said, "We're going to exchange tapes." So, I would run into my stateroom, turn the tape recorder on for a couple of minutes and tell her what's happening.

Hugh Doyle, Chief Engineer, USS Kirk (archival audio): I really don't know where to start. It's been such a ... an unusual couple days for us. We went with the rest of this huge task force of ours up into about... oh 20 miles off of the coast, basically east of Saigon.

Hugh Doyle, Chief Engineer, USS Kirk: As most navy operations are, it was very carefully planned. We planned it to death.

Gerald Berry, Marine Pilot: The chain of command, for-- as I understood it as a captain of the United States Marine Corps, and I think I got it right -- is that for any evacuation, that decision is the ambassador's decision. Graham Martin is the responsible guy. But the military is responsible for giving him all kinds of plans. And this is how we got into the four options.

The first option was you would take commercial ships right up the Saigon River to couple blocks from the embassy. You would load whoever you wanted to bring out on these ships, and you'd be done with it. The second option was, you know, United and Continental and Flying Tiger airlines were still using Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base at the time, and you could've brought anybody you wanted out by commercial aviation. The third option was military fixed-wing aviation, the C5As, the C-141s, which carry a lotta people. You could have brought them out of Tan Son Nhut on those.

The very last option, the very last option, was, was helicopters off the carriers into Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base. We had 75 Marine Corps helicopters out there. The helicopter option -- that was absolutely the last resort. You know they don't go very fast; they don't carry that many people. That was if everything else failed.

Slate: April 24, 1975

Richard Armitage, Special Forces Advisor: I got into Vietnam late on the 24th of April, 1975. Saigon was full of rumor, of false stories. Whether we were gonna have a last attempt to draw a line across the country at Saigon and the south would remain a free republic. All of these things, and it was all churning all around. The fighting was close to Saigon but hadn't shown up in the streets of Saigon. I served as a naval officer and three and a half tours in Vietnam. Two of those years as a Special Forces advisor with a 20-boat river division, all Vietnamese. I could tell jokes and hear jokes in Vietnamese, and once you start off like that, you eventually end up being able to dream in Vietnamese.

In 1975 my mission was to remove or destroy as many ships, boats, anything I considered to be a benefit to the enemy. I met with Captain Do Kiem, who was the operations officer of the Vietnamese navy.

Kiem Do, Captain, South Vietnamese Navy (in Vietnamese, subtitled): He said that the situation is getting desperate now. And you must help me come up with a plan to keep the Vietnamese Navy ships, given to us by the United States, out of the hands of the Communists.

Richard Armitage, Special Forces Advisor: The plan was to sail all the large ships of the South Vietnamese Navy down the Saigon River to the sea and rendezvous at Con Son Island. We had to keep this secret. If word got out it would have had an effect on the morale of the people in the street.

Joseph McBride, State Department Officer: We knew that there were roughly 5,000 Americans still in the country. Many of them had Vietnamese wives, mistresses, whatever. Just hadn't left. And they were basically letting us know we're not leaving without our families. Finally, we were given authority, by the ambassador, to bypass the immigration laws and send these Vietnamese out of the country. So, then we started an operation basically to get out the Americans and their Vietnamese dependents.

Frank Snepp, CIA Analyst: It was not an official evacuation. We still had no organized plan for evacuating high-risk South Vietnamese, because we had an ambassador who was making up his mind on the wing.

Garrick Utley, Reporter, NBC News (archival): The President also asked Congress for authorization to use American troops here to evacuate Americans and Vietnamese who worked for Americans.

Graham Martin, U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam (archival): If it were necessary.

Garrick Utley, Reporter, NBC News (archival): Do you have plans for that?

Graham Martin, U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam (archival): Well of course, every embassy in the world has plans for it.

Garrick Utley, Reporter, NBC News (archival): Do you think it will be necessary?

Graham Martin, U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam (archival): I have no... that, that again you see is a judgment that, that I can't possibly make at this time. We have been reducing the population here as measure of prudence and will take measures to reduce it further as a, as a question of prudence.

Stuart Herrington, Army Captain: The ambassador was extremely skittish, and I guess understandably so, about talking about evacuation, about sending signals that an evacuation was being planned or even executed. He feared it would trigger a panic.

Binh Pho, College Student: It's time to get out. And in Saigon at that time, it was like, who do you know? The key word would be connection. There's a lot of people, they try to get their money. Because, if the people have money, maybe they will find a connection to get out. You want to go? Give me this kind of money. One guy said to me, "your family, tell them to come to the boat dock, I'll be waiting for them." You know, of course they took the money but they never got us.

Dam Pham, Lieutenant, South Vietnamese Army: There was chaos in Saigon at that time. Everybody was looking for ways to get out as soon as possible. Of course, the Americans we worked with had a plan in place for us. They told us to get to the meeting place, which was a safe house near the American Embassy and to wait for buses to come to pick us up.

Joseph McBride, State Department Officer: If we were gonna get people out, we were gonna have to make it happen, and deliver the Vietnamese to the big airplanes in some form or fashion. And the only way we could do that was keeping the airport open as long as we could.

Stuart Herrington, Army Captain: Ambassador Martin still hoped that somehow this thing would not end with the North Vietnamese humiliating the United States by attacking Saigon. But it seemed like the North Vietnamese had other ideas.

Slate: April 29, 1975, 03:43 A.M.

Dan Rather, CBS News (archival): What may be the final battle of Saigon has begun. Communist ground forces have started moving in on Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport.

Reporter (archival audio): Rockets exploded all over the base, touching off three major fires.

Stuart Herrington, Army Captain: The air base was under continuous artillery fire. I felt the rounds. They were so close the shrapnel was plinking against the fence behind us. It was abundantly clear that it was a whole new ball game.

Juan Valdez, Marine Embassy Guard: We never expected any trouble out there. And then of course, fear a little bit set in because now we knew that it really meant business, you know? Were they gonna continue shelling Tan Son Nhut? They had given us a warning, you know, "get out."

Stuart Herrington, Army Captain: As the sun came up General Smith, who was our defense attaché out at Tan Son Nhut, contacted the ambassador and said, "The plan to use the fixed-wing to get a few thousand people out today isn't going to work. And we need to consider that this is it, Option Four." A heavy lift helicopter evacuation. And Ambassador Martin wouldn't hear of it. He said, "I want to come out there, I want to see it." Which he did, he got in a sedan, he didn't lack for guts. There were still rounds coming in. Sporadic. But there were still artillery fire. And he could see that the main runway was full of craters from North Vietnamese artillery. And it was understood that General Smith was not being premature with recommendation for Option Four.

Joseph McBride, State Department Officer: Ambassador Martin's concern very clearly up to now was that once we started an official evacuation it's pretty obvious that the game is over. You got to remember this is an ambassador who had lost his only son in combat in Vietnam. One becomes pretty invested in that country. He had been holding out hope that some kind of third-party solution could be worked out, so that South Vietnam could continue with some form of independence or autonomy. And he was being encouraged to think this might be possible. But the morning of the 29th he came to accept the fact that that wasn't going to happen.

Graham Martin, U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam (archival): And I picked up the phone and told secretary Kissinger to inform the President that I had decided that we would have to go to Option Four.

Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State: When I tell President Ford the airport is being shelled and that it's now time to pull the plug, he keeps coming back time and again. You really think we have to do it? That's how heartbreaking it was for him. He finally, reluctantly, gave the go-ahead for the final evacuation.

Frank Snepp, CIA Analyst: The prearranged signal for the evacuation was broadcast on American radio in Saigon. The message was "the temperature is 105 and rising" and then Bing Crosby's "White Christmas". And sure enough, about 10 o'clock in the morning, I believe, on the 29th, there was Bing Crosby on the airwaves.*

Bing Crosby, singing: "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas. Just like the ones I used to know. Where the treetops glisten and children listen to hear sleigh bells in the snow..."

Stuart Herrington, Army Captain: The plan was when the signal was given, Americans still in Saigon would immediately go to pick up zones around the city so that buses could then come to these 13 locations and get everyone out to the airbase where they would be helicoptered to the fleet. We had prepared three or four landing zones right across the street from the main runway of Tan Son Nhut airbase. Areas which had not been under artillery fire. Where heavy lift helicopters could come in. It was a good plan, they had good facilities, they had good security. Now that Option Four had been declared, I don't think anyone said, "Okay. We have 7,000, 6,000, 5,000," or what have you left to evacuate. I think it was, "We are going to bring out everybody we have left at the airport, and everybody who might show up, and at a point in time, the embassy will evacuate its few hundred by buses to us and it'll be over." But unfortunately, the plan was compromised.

Jim Laurie, NBC News Correspondent: Vietnamese would come up to these pickup points and just try to get on the buses. It was word of mouth. Everybody in Saigon that day seemed to want to leave, and by the time I got to my pickup point, it was chaos. Everybody knew these buses were going to be going out to Tan Son Nhut airbase and there would be an escape from Vietnam.

Slate: Can Tho, 8:00 a.m.

Terry McNamara, Consul General: I got a telephone call from Saigon saying that the president had given an order for us to evacuate all Americans. Everybody was alerted, including all the Vietnamese that I had informed. And we got everybody down to the boats. Our plan was that my deputy would bring up the rear and he would go through the consulate buildings and make sure that we had destroyed all of the sensitive material. Staff Sgt. Hasty stayed and helped him.

Steve Hasty, Marine Consulate Guard: I made the last broadcast, you know, Saigon and any monitoring station, this is Can Tho Consulate signing off the air; we are evacuating. And then we drove down to where Terry McNamara was loading people onboard the landing craft. We were trying to be as unobtrusive as possible in doing so. We did not want a repeat of Da Nang. We set sail with two landing craft, packed with 18 Americans and 300 and something Vietnamese. The biggest concern, of course, was basically the North Vietnamese or what remnants of the VC were there would ambush us at the narrowest portion and basically we'd get our ass handed to us.

Terry McNamara, Consul General: We got some distance from Can Tho and suddenly there were some boats that came along and they fired across our bow.

Steve Hasty, Marine Consulate Guard: They were South Vietnamese navy boats, and they told us to heave to, which we did because they were extremely well armed. Evidentially, the orders had gone out from on high to stop, you know, anybody going out.

Terry McNamara, Consul General: They had been given orders to bring us back to Can Tho because they thought we had deserters on board. You know, military officers and people of military age. There actually were a couple including the deputy Air Force commander who put on civilian clothes and snuck on the boat.

But I wasn't going to go back to Can Tho. So there was a standoff in the middle of the river. I asked the Vietnamese officer in charge to get in touch with the navy commander, Commodore Thang. I had had gotten Commodore Thang's wife and children out of Saigon. I was hoping that he would reciprocate. And he did. He came down finally and in a very loud voice said, "You don't have military people on here or people of military age." And I said, "Oh no, of course not." Well, he told the sailors to stand down and we continued down the river.

Steve Hasty, Marine Consulate Guard: The chances of success of going down the river were 50/50 at best. But we continued on nonetheless.

Slate: 10:00 a.m.

Stuart Herrington, Army Captain: As the morning progressed, the helicopter evacuation was pretty well underway. But the timing of when it would be over wasn't really our timing, it was, frankly, what the North Vietnamese would tolerate. How long would they stand by and let us do this? But that morning, Ambassador Martin received a message that said within 24 hours the U.S. presence in Vietnam had to be closed out. Meaning, we had to be gone.

I was part of the Four Party Joint Military Team, which was stationed out at Tan Son Nhut. We thought, "We're going to get ordered to leave." But instead, we got orders from the ambassador, to go to the embassy and be prepared to stay after the embassy evacuated. We were to be the sole U.S. military presence in Vietnam once the embassy evacuated and the ambassador was gone. Lock ourselves in a room and then come out when the dust is settled and introduce ourselves to the North Vietnamese. This was not a popular plan. But we complied. And around 11, 11:30, we drove to the embassy. And when we got there, it was teeming with people.

Joseph McBride, State Department Officer: That morning, there must have been, I would guess, at least 10,000 people literally ringing the embassy. The embassy compound was the size of a city block. It was big. And all sides of it were filled 2-300 feet back. Fortunately, people were by in large very controlled. They were very patient. They were just hoping desperately to get in.

Binh Pho, College Student: It's like the whole of Saigon wants to get inside the American embassy. So, you have to know somebody. You know. If you're like me, I find my friend and got a little paper to assure us to get in. So several of us went to the embassy. Then my friend, he showed the paper to the guard, and he just kind of pointing to each one of us, and we, one by one, to go inside of the Embassy. When I first got in, I feel so good. I'm in America, I'm almost there. They have a courtyard and a swimming pool and we mostly gather around the swimming pool. And, 1,000 people there. And they just keep coming in.

Frank Snepp, CIA Analyst: That morning, CIA choppers began picking up evacuees off the roofs of buildings around the city and bringing them to the embassy.

There was an old pilot named O.B. Harnage.** He was blind in one eye and lame in one leg, and I said, "Harnage, we got people at 6 Gia Long. You gotta go pick em up." It was the deputy CIA station chief's apartment building. There were a number of very high-risk Vietnamese including the Defense Minister of South Vietnam, all waiting to be rescued. As they climbed up the ladder to the roof, a photographer took that

famous photograph. Many people thought that was the U.S. Embassy, it wasn't. But, it indicated to what extent chaos had descended on this entire operation.

Stuart Herrington, Army Captain: So the CIA choppers were bringing people to the embassy who where then supposed to go to Tan Son Nhut airbase by bus where they would magically find their way to heavy lift helicopters. It was very clear to the citizenry that something was up and that something was probably the Americans are leaving.

Inside the embassy, we discovered as we walked through the buildings and the outbuildings and the swimming pool area and the social club area, everywhere we looked was teeming with Vietnamese. We counted them and the total number was about 2,800. There was no hiding it that somehow, people had to have let these people into the embassy. Was it, you know, marine security guards who looked the other way? Was it American employees in the embassy who were doing kind of what we did with black ops and taking care of their own? We never got to the bottom of that, and frankly, we never pursued it.

Mike Sullivan, Marine Embassy Guard: One of the marines said to me, "You know, we should take out the tailor." There was a tailor who made all of our civilian clothes. So, I said, "Why don't we take out the cook too?" We should take out the cook too, and all the other cooks. They should get out, they had business with Americans. So, they took the bread truck and they rounded up the tailor, the cooks, and the dishwashers, a few others and their families, and drove them into the embassy compound.

Stuart Herrington, Army Captain: The embassy had become a refuge. People were hoping to get in, and we were hoping to get people out and down to the airbase.

Joseph McBride, State Department Officer: You couldn't have gotten to the airfield if you wanted to. The roads were totally blocked. They'd forced the buses to come back. So, what if the master plan to take people out by air from Tan Son Nhut doesn't work? Where's our fall back? Where's Plan B?

Stuart Herrington, Army Captain: If we were going to bring out everybody who was inside the embassy it was obvious that there was the need for a hasty plan to be developed for a helicopter airlift out of the embassy to the fleet. And we had less than 24 hours to pull it off.

Frank Snepp, CIA Analyst: There was in the parking lot of the embassy a great Tamarind tree, which the ambassador had often referred to as, "as steadfast as the American commitment in Vietnam." The CIA station chief that last morning said, "Mr. Ambassador, we have to cut this tree down."

Juan Valdez, Marine Embassy Guard: You could not land any large helicopters on the parking lot unless the tree and all the shrubbery was all gone. The ambassador had resisted us cutting that tree because he did not want anybody to be alerted that we were doing any sort of evacuation or were going to do any sort of evacuation.

Mike Sullivan, Marine Embassy Guard: He was upset. But finally he succumbed, you know, to just common sense and gave up his-- I guess you could call it a dream, and we cut it down.

Frank Snepp, CIA Analyst: He had also, for the past few days, prevented us from burning classified documents for fear that it would panic the South Vietnamese. So, that morning of the 29th, we had thousands of pages of classified documents we had failed to destroy beforehand.

Mike Sullivan, Marine Embassy Guard: Our next job was just lookin' at that classified document idea and gettin' rid of that. So we went to every office and told them to start pulling stuff. And piles and piles of paper began coming out, and we began shredding.

There was a small building where we handled the pay for the Vietnamese who worked for the embassy. And in this building there was over \$1 million in U.S. currency. So, we had to send a message to the Navy, who sent it to the Treasury Department who came back and said, "Destroy it." So I assigned a few Marines to get

rid of the money. And I said "Oh by the way, we're going to lock you in there." It took them eight hours to burn a million dollars.

Richard Armitage, Special Forces Advisor: That morning fear and desperation were the order of the day. But I had a job to do, and it was an important job to do, I thought, to deny the enemy the South Vietnamese Naval ships.

Kiem Do, Captain, South Vietnamese Navy (in Vietnamese, subtitled): Mr. Armitage called and said, "Captain Kiem! We have to leave today." Some of ships were in disrepair. Our plan was to get them running even if they had only one working engine.

Richard Armitage, Special Forces Advisor: We had expected, frankly, a longer time period to get ready. We had been told by people in our intelligence community that we might have as long as the 4th of May, but the North Vietnamese were closing in quite tightly, and clearly it was time to send the signal to leave.

Kiem Do, Captain, South Vietnamese Navy (in Vietnamese, subtitled): We had about 32 vessels that we could sail. I told Armitage that we needed as many sailors as we could muster. But they had to be allowed to bring their families on board with them. If they weren't, they wouldn't go.

Richard Armitage, Special Forces Advisor: I knew this, but I didn't know how many civilians were gonna be on board. I had no idea.

Kiem Do, Captain, South Vietnamese Navy (in Vietnamese, subtitled): The truth is, planning an evacuation was above my rank. But if you know something is right, you must ignore the rules and follow your heart.

Slate: 12:30 p.m.

Gerald Berry, Marine Pilot: I was the first one into the embassy, and my only mission at this time, this is early in the afternoon, was to bring the ambassador out. It was actually a mission that was called "embassy snatch," I was just supposed to get the ambassador. I land and I said to the people, I said, "I'm here to get the ambassador." Well, not quite.

Frank Snepp, CIA Analyst: The ambassador refused to leave until he could get as many Vietnamese on as many choppers as possible. The evacuation of Vietnamese happened because Graham Martin wanted it to happen.

Gerald Berry, Marine Pilot: So, they loaded some Vietnamese on my helicopter, and because I'm supposed to have the ambassador on board, we go right to the command ship, the USS Blue Ridge. We land on the Blue Ridge, General Carey comes out, wants to know where the ambassador is. I said, "Well, he didn't get on." I mean, I don't know who I'm supposed to tell, but I told everybody I was supposed to get the ambassador but the ambassador didn't get on. So that starts the lift. Like I said, we had 75 Marine Corps helicopters. You and your wingman would fly into the embassy, get your passengers loaded and fly back out to the ships. It was a little over an hour, back and forth.

Slate: 2:30 p.m.

Paul Jacobs, Commanding Officer, USS Kirk: On the USS Kirk, our mission was to protect the helicopters moving from the embassy out to the aircraft carriers and back and forth. We were very close to the action.

Hugh Doyle, Chief Engineer, USS Kirk: You could stand there on the deck, and you could watch it all happen. We thought that the USS Kirk would just going to be an observer to this whole thing when all of a sudden, on radar, we started seeing these little blips coming out from the shore.

Hugh Doyle, Chief Engineer, USS Kirk (archival audio): I really don't know where to start. We looked up at the horizon and all you could see were helicopters all heading towards us.

Hugh Doyle, Chief Engineer, USS Kirk: These were not Marine Corps helicopters. They were small helicopters, the little Hueys, which were never part of the evacuation plan. But they were flying over top of us. We were watching them fly over top over and over and over again.

Paul Jacobs, Commanding Officer, USS Kirk: We viewed them as enemy until we could verify who it, who it was, and then we realized that these were South Vietnamese trying to escape. I figured if we could save one, at least we'd save 15-20 people. They were packed in there like sardines. So I made the decision: land the helicopter.

Hugh Doyle, Chief Engineer, USS Kirk: One of our sailors could speak rudimentary Vietnamese. So we put him on the radio and he started broadcasting. "This is ship 1087. Land here."

Hugh Doyle, Chief Engineer, USS Kirk (archival audio): So, we got his attention. He came flying over and landed on our flight deck. And uh, turned out that the pilot, he was the pilot for the deputy chairman of the joint chiefs of staff. Real high up. And he had the general with him; it was a two star general. And uh...the two star general's nephew. Three women, about four children. It was a big deal for us.

Paul Jacobs, Commanding Officer, USS Kirk: When it landed, we got everything off. And I looked up because there were five, six, seven stacked up, ready to land.

Hugh Doyle, Chief Engineer, USS Kirk: Turned out, all throughout the southern part of Vietnam, there were South Vietnamese army and air force installations with one or two or three or four helicopters, and those helicopters were flyable, their pilots were there. And when they realized that the evacuation was happening and they weren't going to be part of it, they said, "Oh yeah, we are."

Paul Jacobs, Commanding Officer USS Kirk: These young Vietnamese pilots would go to their homes, land right in their front yards, pick up their families and anybody else and head out to sea hoping they could rendezvous with a ship. Well, we're one of the first ships they saw.

Hugh Doyle, Chief Engineer, USS Kirk (archival audio): Our flight deck will only take one helicopter at a time landing. There are no wheels on them, they just have skids. We couldn't think of what else to do, these other planes were looking for a place to land, so we just, just, physically pushed them.

Hugh Doyle, Chief Engineer, USS Kirk: Of course, this was a big old helicopter, thousands of pounds, so we had to figure out how to get it 15 feet over to the edge of the flight deck.

Paul Jacobs, Commanding Officer, USS Kirk: You don't have time to think about what you did, you just had to do it. So, we opened up our flight deck, and they begin to land, one right after the other. Some of them are shot at, holes in them.

Hugh Doyle, Chief Engineer, USS Kirk: Most of the Vietnamese who came out, I'm talking about the flight crews, they were heavily armed. All with sidearms, some with M-16 rifles. They had no idea what was going to happen so they came out ready for anything, really. So, we had to disarm them.

Hugh Doyle, Chief Engineer, USS Kirk (archival audio): None of them had ever landed on a ship before, they were Vietnamese air force. Everybody had a gun, we took the guns away from them. And about five minutes later, another one came in and landed. And uh, we pushed his airplane over the side. That was the second one, I helped pushed that one over too. Then the third plane came in. It landed also. We pushed it over the side. So meanwhile we've thrown three helicopters in the water so far. This is incredible. I know you probably don't believe any of this, but it's all true.

Slate: 3:00 p.m.

Stuart Herrington, Army Captain: By late afternoon, the chopper flow at the embassy really started. And each time a bird came in, here would go another 40, 50 people. But did the right mix of people get out? And who says that these were the people who either deserved or should have gone out? At the embassy, a lot of the people who got out happened to be good wall jumpers.

Juan Valdez, Marine Embassy Guard: The choppers started coming in at 10-minute intervals. One would land on the roof, and one would land on the parking lot. They would put all the Vietnamese in groups, they would search them and if they had any weapons, all those weapons were thrown into the swimming pool. And as soon as the chopper would land, they would be brought into the restricted area where a couple of the marines would escort them into the aircraft. Then they would raise the ramp up and take off.

Binh Pho, College Student: I remember I talk to my friend and he said, "Oh, it's our turn now, we're almost there." You know so, we're all excited. And I remember very distinctly that every time a helicopter coming down, it just blew us away. We have to duck down to fight with the wind of the chopper.

Stuart Herrington, Army Captain: Three of the choppers that came in each landed a platoon of 40 marines from the task force. They had to be brought in because we didn't have enough marines in the embassy security guard to secure the walls.

Dam Pham, Lieutenant, South Vietnamese Army: I went with my wife to the embassy. A lot of people, they clenched to the top of the wall but they couldn't get in.

Stuart Herrington, Army Captain: Each gate was besieged like that, although the side gate was the principle place where they came. People holding letters saying, you know, "I worked for the Americans, please let me in." Journalists were arriving and counting on being recognized to be let in by the marines.

Dam Pham, Lieutenant, South Vietnamese Army: There was a sea of people wanting to get out by helicopters. But, well, they looked up at the helicopters leaving and I could see their eyes. Desperate eyes.

Miki Nguyen: My dad flew a Chinook helicopter in the South Vietnamese air force. He had been waiting for orders but his captain had, you know, basically just left. So he and some other pilots picked out the best Chinooks and took off. He said it was the Wild West at this point. Just you and your horse and you just do what you had to do to survive and take care of your family. He had given my mom a heads up if she did hear a Chinook coming to get ready. I was six and a half years old. I can still hear the rumbling, a very, you know, familiar rumbling of a Chinook. When you hear the Chinook coming, you know it's coming. I knew my dad was coming.

In Saigon, during my childhood, it was like, say, living in the middle of busy LA. So, there's really not a big area to land the Chinook. So he came in and landed in a playfield. Caused a lot of wind, caused a lot of commotion. My mom grabbed my little sister, who was about six months at that time and a little brother who was about three or four years old and myself. We quickly ran into the Chinook, and we all flew off out into the Pacific Ocean. My dad was afraid for not having enough fuel. Afraid for a lot of things. He was just flying blind. Then he just saw a ship out there.

Hugh Doyle, Chief Engineer, USS Kirk (archival audio): In the middle of the day, after we'd taken those first helicopters aboard, this huge helicopter called a Chinook. It came out and tried to land on the ship. Oh, we almost... the thing almost crashed aboard our ship.

Paul Jacobs, Commanding Officer, USS Kirk: This big Chinook showed up. There's no way he could land on Kirk without impacting the ship. He would have killed everybody on this helicopter plus my crew.

Hugh Doyle, Chief Engineer, USS Kirk: It was way too big to land. We thought that the helicopter would just fly away. But as the ship was moving forward probably four, five, six knots, something like that, the pilot communicated that he was running low on fuel.

Paul Jacobs, Commanding Officer, USS Kirk: He opened up the port side of the helicopter and hovered across the stern of the *Kirk*. Then, all of a sudden, here comes a human.

Miki Nguyen: One by one, we jump out. I jumped out, my brother jumped out. My mom was holding my, my sister. Obviously, very scared. And she just, you know, trustingly, just with one hand, with her right hand, holding on with her left to brace herself, you know, just, dropped my baby sister.

Hugh Doyle, Chief Engineer, USS Kirk: One fella is standing there and he said he looked up and saw this big bundle of stuff come flying out and it was a baby, it was the one-year old baby. And then the mother jumped out and he caught her too.

Then the pilot flew out on our starboard right side. He hovered with his wheels in and out of the water. He hovered there for like 10 minutes and we couldn't figure out what was doing and it turned out what he was doing was taking his flight suit off. Here's a man flying a twin rotor helicopter by himself and at the same time he's taking off a flight suit. How you do it, I've talked to helicopter pilots and they can't figure out how he did that. You know, like a Houdini, trying to get out of this thing. And finally, he made the helicopter roll to the right as he stepped out the door on the left.

Miki Nguyen: Just thunderous loud noise. The shrapnel is just blowing up. And suddenly, just quiet. And he pops up, and he's alive.

Hugh Doyle, Chief Engineer, USS Kirk: And he swam away. The helicopter was only about 20 feet from him when he hit the water. It was amazing.

Hugh Doyle, Chief Engineer, USS Kirk (archival audio): We went out and picked him up -- he was none the worse for wear, he was a little bit wet, only one unfortunate thing is he had some small bars of gold which was all his worldly possessions that were in his shirt pocket and it sank. So he lost everything. He didn't own a thing but his underwear when he finally came aboard the ship. He was a tremendous pilot. The guy was just so cool and calm. We've so far taken a total of 17 helicopters. We ended up with 157 people aboard this ship.

Paul Jacobs, Commanding Officer, USS Kirk: That crew was very special. They went, they took their money, went to the Navy exchange or commissary, bought all the clothes and food they could get, took it up and gave it to the refugees they had befriended. They were unbelievable.

Hugh Doyle, Chief Engineer, USS Kirk (archival audio): We laid mats and all kinds of blankets and stuff out on the deck for the babies, and there were all kinds of-- there were infants and children and women, and oh, it was a-- it was a scene I'll never forget.

Miki Nguyen: We were happy. My mom was just, you know, wow. Symbolically, it was like, the first step onto not American soil but American freedom.

Slate: 5:00 p.m.

Steve Hasty, Marine Consulate Guard: We continued down the river, our landing craft in the lead. We were, you know at this point, four or five hours from Can Tho. It's a metal landing craft. The sun is beating down, it's hotter than hell. A less than pleasant voyage. When suddenly, whoosh, bam! Somebody fired a B40 rocket at us. We immediately started returning fire. We weren't sure who the dip-wad was that was opening up on us, but we continued blazing away as we got past the ambush site. We said, "Alright. That was just a taste of what's coming. Once we hit the absolute narrowest portion, that's where we're really going to be in danger." Stack the ammo because this one's gonna be ugly.

Terry McNamara, Consul General: The people on the boat were scared. We had to go through narrow channels between the islands. If we're gonna really get, get hit, it'll be there. But, just at that point, dark clouds formed in the sky and it started raining like hell.

Steve Hasty, Marine Consulate Guard: Could not see the bow of the landing craft from the stern and that's 60 feet. The noise of the rain hitting the water on the river was so loud that it muffled the sound of our engines. And this continued on for about 25 minutes. It was long enough to get us through the most dangerous part of the trip. And as the rain started to let up, we had reached the area of the river past the channel, past the little islands where it opened up into a broad river again. So somebody was looking out for us that day.

Terry McNamara, Consul General: I remember looking back at the sun setting over the Mekong Delta, which is a beautiful place, and thinking, "Well, I'll never see this again." I had gotten very attached to Vietnam.

Steve Hasty, Marine Consulate Guard: As we came out into the South China Sea, it got dark and every now and then I would fire off a couple of flares, just in hopes that, you know, maybe there is a ship out there. Nothing. And then we saw a faint light on the horizon, and as we got a little bit closer, we could see that they were the lights of a ship's rigging. So, we said what the heck? So we made for it. We came up alongside and somebody shouted, "Get rid of your weapons. Nobody comes aboard with weapons." So I yelled, "We're Marines and we're coming aboard with our weapons." Well, as it turned out, the guys yelling down were Marines.

Terry McNamara, Consul General: It was an American freighter, the Pioneer Contender. They took us aboard. And I had 300 people with me. They got them into the hold of the ship.

Steve Hasty, Marine Consulate Guard: All our Vietnamese remained on the Pioneer Contender. We made sure they were taken care of and the Pioneer Contender was going to Guam. We knew they were safe.

Gerald Berry, Marine Pilot: When we started the evacuation, we were very very excited about it. Then, your next emotion probably was just determined to get this job done and get these people out. And then, later, as it went on, you became fatigued and frustrated that you could never make a dent in the amount of people that were coming out of the embassy. You'd ask questions like, "Was the crowd getting any smaller? When are we gonna finish this?" You know, and they'd say, you know, "We're under orders from the ambassador, we're doing the best we can".

Stuart Herrington, Army Captain: The carrier pilots were saying, "Look, it's an uncontrollable sea of people and Ambassador Martin has lost his objectivity. That Ambassador Martin is trying to evacuate all of Saigon through the U.S. embassy." But he was doing his best under terrible circumstances.

Joseph McBride, State Department Officer: Ambassador Martin was dragging out the evacuation as long as he could to get as many South Vietnamese out as possible. Each helicopter took about 40 people. He knew that once the Americans were gone, the evacuation would be over. So they just put one or two Americans on each one.

Gerald Berry, Marine Pilot: You're very tired, and you're not seeing an end to this thing. So we got the word out, you know, "We could use some help out here, we only have 75 helicopters." And the word comes back "No. No, Marine pilots don't get tired."

Stuart Herrington, Army Captain: Back at the Embassy under the Ambassador's direction we of course were taking advantage of the presence of the aircraft to evacuate threatened folks. But there were other independent efforts to get people out.

Joseph McBride, State Department Officer: Several of us at the Embassy agreed that we would drive vans down to the docks on the Saigon River. I had an assigned assembly point in the middle of Saigon, and I crammed about 15 people into a nine-person van and then drove through the streets of Saigon through various checkpoints down to the docks. People would get out and go running for these commercial boats and get on. I made a number of runs and there'd just be more and more and more people. Finally, as the sun was going down, we're running out of light. A man came up to me. I turned to him and said, "This is, this is my last

load. I can't take anymore." I said, "Get your family." And he said, "Can't do it. My family's too big... My family's too big." And he just shook my hand and said, "Thanks for trying." And walked away.

Joseph McBride, State Department Officer: So, I came back to the embassy and parked the, parked the van. It was already getting well into twilight. Got my way through the crowd, it was a big crowd. I had nothing more I could do. So, I went to get on the helicopter. And Ambassador Martin pulled me out of line and he said, "I know what you've been doing. I know you've been out there, we've been talking. I wanna thank you." I thought that was a kind gesture. By that time, it was definitely dark. The lights of the helicopter inside radiated very clearly. I sat down, looked around. I was one of maybe two or three Americans. The rest were all Vietnamese. And we flew out.

Binh Pho, College Student: It was very dark. I remember that. And people started to elbow each other try to get in the front line. And that's when the Captain Herrington started speaking to us in Vietnamese.

Stuart Herrington, Army Captain: (Speaks Vietnamese). Nobody is gonna be left behind. (Speaks Vietnamese).

Binh Pho, College Student: And then he said, um, "When you are in American embassy, you are in American soil. I promise, me and my soldier will be the last one to leave the embassy." So after that announcement, everybody feel relaxed. Literally, we're so relaxed we have nothing to worry about. Yeah.

Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State: We were told that the North Vietnamese tanks were coming very close. So, we asked, we in the White House, asked the Defense Department, how many South Vietnamese were left? Left meant, inside the embassy compound. And then we calculated how many helicopters it would take to get them out. We told Martin that he had to be on the last helicopter.

Stuart Herrington, Army Captain: All I know is that in Washington, there was confusion about the numbers on the ground. At 1am, there were 1,100 people left to evacuate. After we'd had a flurry of choppers, and cleaned out more than half of them and there were 420 people left. We received an order from Washington that the lift was over other than the extraction of the remaining Americans.

Gerald Berry, Marine Pilot: About four in the morning, 4:30, I land on the *USS Blue Ridge* again. So, General Carey comes out, gives me an apple and a cup of coffee or something and says, "We're under orders from the president. You've got to get the ambassador out." So we fly in, I land on the roof exactly at 4:50 in the morning and I said, "I'm not leaving until the ambassador is onboard."

Juan Valdez, Marine Embassy Guard: One of the marines lowered the flag, folded it up, and escorted the ambassador up to the landing zone up on top of the embassy, and he gave him the flag, and that was it.

Stuart Herrington, Army Captain: Major Kean came to Colonel Madison, said "No more. Only Americans from this point on." And Madison said, "The hell you say. We've got these people over here." And Kean said, "Sir, not gonna happen. It's a presidential order". And Madison said, "I'll take this up with the ambassador." He was very hot under the collar, and Kean said, "You can't. That's him." And pointed to the CH-46 that was just flying away.

Gerald Berry, Marine Pilot: So the ambassador's on board. And, out we go. We land on the *Blue Ridge*, 15 or 20, maybe 25 people get off with the Ambassador, and that was the end of it. I flew 18.3 hours straight through. Graham Martin looked very tired. Extremely haggard. I mean, he looked like, I'm sure the pressure was immense.

Reporter (archival): What time would cease evacuation?

Graham Martin, U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam (archival): Cease evacuation?

Gerald Berry, Marine Pilot: We could still be flying if we hadn't gotten the ambassador out because he refused to stop the lift

Graham Martin, U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam (archival): I think about 3...

Reporter (archival): Three in the morning?

Graham Martin, U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam (archival): 3:45...

Stuart Herrington, Army Captain: Colonel Madison says to me, "We're screwed. Stu, you stay down here in the parking lot and keep these 420 people warm." Meaning, if they see us all leave at the same time, they'll panic. "And then make your way to the roof. We gotta go." And he was very angry and very disappointed. So they disappeared into the embassy. And I went to where the remaining Vietnamese were waiting. And I told them, (speaks Vietnamese) "Big helicopters about to come." And um, waited a few minutes. Then, I saw a chopper take off and I thought, "Shit, was I supposed to be on that one?"

So, I looked at the Vietnamese and I said, (speaks Vietnamese) "I gotta take a leak". And I left into the shadows. I made my way around in a circuitous route and went into the embassy.

I thought about how this really really was wrong. I thought maybe I should just say I'm not leaving. Until they go. Cause I promised them. And then I said, don't be a fool. Maybe they've started shooting down helicopters for all you know. You're not going to get anybody else out. It's a presidential order. This decision has been made. So, I got to the roof and a CH-46 alighted on the rooftop, put its ramp down, and we got on board. As it took off, the door was open. And down in the parking lot, I could see the group of 420 of them, they were right where we had left them marshaled on this little patch of grass. I felt absolutely awful. It was just so serious and deep a betrayal.

Slate: 4:00 a.m.

Paul Jacobs, Commanding Officer, USS Kirk: Late that night, I was quite surprised that I got a call to come alongside the flagship; the admiral wants to speak to you. My first reaction, as any CO is "what did we do?" not realizing we had been picked for a special mission.

Hugh Doyle, Chief Engineer, USS Kirk: We were supposed to pick up this, this person. He was 30 years old, came aboard, civilian clothes. And Captain was just told to take his direction from this guy.

Richard Armitage, Special Forces Advisor: I went aboard the Kirk and met with Captain Paul Jacobs. And the first thing he said to me is "Young man, I'm not accustomed to strange civilians coming aboard my ship armed in the middle of the night." And I was like, "Captain, I assure you, neither am I."

Paul Jacobs, Commanding Officer, USS Kirk: He smelled like a Naval Officer, you know. You know one officer can smell another one. So, I looked him up in the blue book, he's a graduate Naval Academy. So, from that point on, we were fine. "What do you want to do? And we'll work together as a team."

Richard Armitage, Special Forces Advisor: We steamed down to Con Son Island, and we could see on the radar display that there were a lot of blips. And I remember the dawn breaking and the sun coming up, seeing what I had seen as a radar display in person. There were dozens of ships. And not just Vietnamese naval ships but also civilian ships. And they were all totally crammed with people.

Paul Jacobs, Commanding Officer, USS Kirk: There were no words to describe what a ship looks like that holds 200 and it's got 2,000 on it. I don't think anybody really understood the magnitude of it until we looked at what we got in front of us. It looked like something out of Exodus. Our mission was to help the ships into international waters. But now they had all these people. My reaction is "How the hell are we gonna do this?" Most of the Vietnamese navy ships were dead in the water. Some were anchored, some were just

adrift. So, we sent over engineering, technical people to see what we could do to help them, and get em underway.

Richard Armitage, Special Forces Advisor: Some of these ships had been hit by enemy fire coming down the Saigon River. One of the boats had been hit and sinking, so it went alongside one of the other Vietnamese Navy ships. A wooden plank was thrown between the two ships for the civilians and navy personnel on the damaged ship to cross onto the ship that wasn't. The seas were rolling and it was a somewhat precarious passage. At one point, a young Vietnamese man panicked as a young girl, I remember, was walking across this plank and he kind of rushed ahead of her and she fell between the two ships.

Hugh Doyle, Chief Engineer, *USS Kirk* (archival audio): Apparently one of the Vietnamese men pushed a girl. She was killed. She was drowned between the two ships, and that almost started a panic.

Richard Armitage, Special Forces Advisor: A Vietnamese sailor immediately shot this guy and then order was restored.

Hugh Doyle, Chief Engineer, *USS Kirk* (archival audio): They said, "There will be no pushing and there will be no shoving on this ship." People calmed down greatly after that.

Richard Armitage, Special Forces Advisor: We had worked a plan out to sail the ships to the Philippines. And, the *Kirk* was going to escort them. But the fact that they're going to be crammed with an unknown number of civilians was somewhat problematic. The U.S. government already had a refugee problem with the U.S. naval ships. This was another 30 or more thousand people to deal with.

Paul Jacobs, Commanding Officer, *USS Kirk*: We were up all night talking about it. And I'm convinced that if we had sent them back or took them back they would have killed them all. And Armitage decided to bring them. He didn't get permission from Washington to do that.

Richard Armitage, Special Forces Advisor: I thought it was a lot easier to beg forgiveness than to get permission. So the decision was made, and they all went with us.

Slate: Saigon 6:00 a.m.

Mike Sullivan, Marine Embassy Guard: We had finally got out the, the last of the refugees that we could get out. Now we had to evacuate the Marines. They were all inside the embassy building. Except for us. I was still on Embassy grounds, with two of my sergeants. And I said, "You two stay right with me. Don't leave my side." We slowly walked backwards to the embassy door and a couple of Vietnamese came towards me. I said, "We have no more helicopters. That's it. I'm sorry. We cannot take you." And they began to argue with me. They spoke good English, too. "We can ride in your helicopter." I said, "I'm sorry, no more." So I spun around and slammed these huge doors, and we locked it from behind.

Binh Pho, College Student: I kind of fall asleep off and on, but what gets me woke up is the noise. It's a different noise. So I kind of look up. And the first thing in my sight, was, I didn't see that soldier there anymore, on that wall. There were people were throwing blankets or jackets and materials over the barb wire so they can climb over the wire to come in. It was like, "Where are the soldiers?"

Mike Sullivan, Marine Embassy Guard: We were going up the stairs. Below me I could hear feet running on the stairway. When we got to the roof, Master Sergeant Valdez was there. I says, "We got everybody?" "Yeah." "Man, there's somebody chasing me up those stairs."

Juan Valdez, Marine Embassy Guard: There were wall lockers up on the roof and those big fire extinguishers with wheels so we, we tilted all those wall lockers and the fire extinguishers, put them against the door. There was a little window there that we could see them in there. All the Vietnamese trying to get to the roof. The Marines started going out as choppers came in. Then all of a sudden, choppers all cease. There was 11 of us still left there.

Ron Nessen, White House Press Secretary (archival): The briefing was delayed until the evacuation was completed and the last helicopters are now in the air. The President commends the personnel of the Armed Forces who accomplished it, as well as Ambassador Graham Martin and the staff of his mission who served so well under difficult conditions.

Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State: We were told that Martin had left on the last helicopter. And that the evacuation had ended.

Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State (archival): I'm confident that every American who wanted to come out, uh, is, is out

Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State: So we held a briefing. Well, turned out not to be the last helicopter because there was another horrendous screw up.

Juan Valdez, Marine Embassy Guard: There were no helicopters. And we were just kinda sitting down around, looking at each other. Wondering, you know, "what's going to happen to here," you know, whether they had truly forgotten about us.

Mike Sullivan: So, I got on my radio and I began saying "U.S. Navy, U.S. Navy, American embassy, request extraction immediate." And I repeated this over and over and over. The only option we had was sit on the stupid roof like a sitting duck. And I kept thinking, "Where are the North Vietnamese?"

Juan Valdez, Marine Embassy Guard: About 7:45 in the morning, we could start seeing North Vietnamese coming down the road. My thoughts were, "what's to keep them from bombing the top of the embassy roof and blowing us off," You know?

Mike Sullivan, Marine Embassy Guard: A tank is going to take one shot. If it hits the building, you're gone. So, I didn't like the idea of being up there. But where else are you gonna go? Finally I looked out and I saw a black dot.

Juan Valdez, Marine Embassy Guard: When that chopper landed, I told the marines, "Go, get in." I was the last one out. And as I was putting my foot on the ramp, I fell down, and I'm just hanging on, and the ramps going up...

Mike Sullivan, Marine Embassy Guard: The ramp is closing and I did what I was trained in my first tour. Count. So, I went "One, two, three, four, five, six... ten. Ten? One, two, three, four, five, six... ten. Ten!" And I looked at the crew chief, and I said, "Put it down." I knew I was missing one man. I remember looking at the ramp and two hands were over the top of it.

Juan Valdez, Marine Embassy Guard: So the marines just kinda grabbed me, and then just pulled me in.

Mike Sullivan, Marine Embassy Guard: We left, by my watch at 7:58, Saigon time. And we were the last 11.

Jim Laurie, NBC News Correspondent: My cameraman Neil Davis and I decided to stay. We saw the last helicopter leave from the roof. We then tried to scramble into the embassy ourselves. Neil got to the roof. I did not. And he saw dozens of Vietnamese just sitting on the helicopter pad on the roof of the embassy, waiting, wanting to get out. And of course, no more helicopters were gonna come.

Binh Pho, College Student: I didn't join them. I actually scared. If the communist come in, the last thing we want them to see us at American embassy. So we get out.

Jim Laurie, NBC News Correspondent: People were coming in and out of the buildings. Literally, anything that could not be fastened down or was not fastened down was being taken away. Any souvenirs from the ambassador's office were taken away. Almost brick by brick, the embassy was being dismantled. It

was ordinary looting... but more than that, I think I was just frustration and anger and an opportunity to get back, perhaps, at the Americans because, in the view of many in the crowd that day, we had deserted them.

John Chancellor, NBC News (archival): NBC news correspondent Jim Laurie is one of the few Americans still left in Saigon. In the city, when President Duong Van Minh went on the radio and told the Viet Cong that his country would surrender unconditionally, and that he had told its army to lay down its arms. Here from Saigon radio hookup is Laurie's report on the surrender.

Jim Laurie, NBC News Correspondent (archival audio): In the words of General Minh, we are here to hand over the power of government to you in order to avoid bloodshed. It is a unilateral cease-fire and an unconditional surrender. The 30 year war in South Vietnam is at last over.

Dam Pham, Lieutenant, South Vietnamese Army: The first thing I did was to destroy my documents; my badges, just keeping the civilian ID. And then I went around Saigon to see what happened.

I saw a lot of South Vietnamese soldiers in underwear. They took off all their military clothes, boots, and they threw them away. And I thought, "Well, what would happen to them? And to me, to myself?" Right.

I thought of my friends who were killed in action and I thought, "Well, is this what we fought for? Is this what the Americans came for?" And I didn't have the answer.

Frank Snepp, CIA Analyst: I have wrestled with this ever since. I realized that I had become the quintessential American in Vietnam. I had all these causes, all these big things I was doing. I was trying to get the truth back to Washington. I was talking to agents, trying to persuade the ambassador, and I forgot that what was at stake were human lives.

Binh Pho, College Student: For years after that, I hear that sound in my head, that sound like "Tchk-tchk-tchk-tchk". In the middle of the night, I just jump up and thought the helicopter come pick me up. I called it "dream in the wind." Later we found out, "the big fleet is out there; you can just take a boat and go there. They, they, they take everybody. If you can get out there, you're on board." And I just didn't know that. You know, so...

Paul Jacobs, Commanding Officer, USS Kirk: As we approached the Philippines with our refugees, there was a big problem. They wouldn't let us in, and the reason they wouldn't let us in is because the government there had recognized the new regime in Vietnam and these navy ships we were escorting were all flying South Vietnamese flags. And the solution was to reflag all these ships as American ships.

Kiem Do, Captain, South Vietnamese Navy (in Vietnamese, subtitled): I asked the Admiral of the U.S. Navy to allow us to perform a solemn flag-lowering ceremony for the ships.

I had sung my anthem many times, but never before had I felt like I did on that day. I was 42 years old, an old fox on the sea. I couldn't hold back my tears. I realized I had lost everything. I had lost my beloved country.

Paul Jacobs, Commanding Officer, USS Kirk: They lowered their Vietnamese flag, people crying. It was very emotional for them to lose their country, their flag, their ship. Everything is gone. And then we raised the American flag; we tried to do that with as much dignity as we could.

Stuart Herrington, Army Captain: There were thousands and thousands of Americans who served in Vietnam who were sitting at home heartbroken at watching this whole thing come to naught.

The end of April of 1975 was the whole Vietnam involvement in a microcosm. Promises made in good faith, promises broken. People being hurt because we didn't get our act together. You know, the whole Vietnam War is a story that kinda sounds like that.

But on the other hand, sometimes there are moments when good people have to rise to the occasion and do the things that need to be done. And, in Saigon, there was no shortage of people like that.

Slate: In the last days of the Vietnam war, some 130,000 South Vietnamese managed to escape, including 77,000 by events described in this film.

Slate: Of those left behind, hundreds of thousands were sent to re-education camps. Many died of disease and starvation. An unknown number were executed.

Slate: After landing in the Philippines, Kiem Do reunited with his wife and children.

Slate: Later that year, they arrived in the United States.

Slate: Bin Pho was arrested and spent over a year in a re-education camp.

Slate: He escaped Vietnam by boat and arrived in the United States in 1979.

Slate: Dam Pham was arrested and sent to a re-education camp.

Slate: After 13 years of hard labor, he was released and made his way to America.